38

No. 8

Observations

on

The manner of Living and Diseases of the Slaves on the Wateree River

By William L. M'Caa

of Camden

S. Carolina

Presented as an

Inaugural Essay

to

The Faculty of Medicine

in

The University of Pensylva.

Philadelphia 1822

Passed March 11th. 1823

The climate of South Carolina I presume to be so generally well known, that any remarks on the subject in this essay, would be considered altogether superfluous.

It is a fact also familiar to many, that the "planters" in that state, particularly those owning lands on the larger watercourses, are, most of them, men of wealth, whose fortunes consists in Lands and Slaves. The principal article of produce which engages the attention of those planters, is the Cotton; this plant we know to require the strongest of land for its happy growth, and such land is to be found extending from the banks of the large creeks and rivers, to some one two, or even a greater number of miles into the adjacent country. The negro's who are engaged in the immediate cultivation of the cotton are necessarily exposed from morning until night in the atmosphere of a swamp, undered

dark and foul by the exhalations from the vast number of stagnant ponds and lakes which are always to be seen in such situations, and also the effluvia arising from the banks of the river, as the water recedes in consequence of dry weather, or from previous increase from the fall of rain, which not unfrequently is in such quantity as to inundate the whole of the lowlands and blight the prospect of the planter.

Nor are the slaves only exposed during the day, for when night relieves them of their toil they repair to little filthy huts, situated in general, on the very margin of the waters, and there in crowded numbers sink upon their food is principally indian meal with probably some little bacon or beef, the water of the river, which in the summer is always warm, and in the winter almost constantly muddy is their only drink, the most of them are well clothed —

The
of fo
with
hurs
thur
ans
shen
as an
on o
stan
to ac
ture
it is
and
thur
dier
little
but
for
in
thun
escc
say

Thus far I have made but a statement of facts; and can any one look over them without asking the question, do not great numbers of those unfortunate beings find relief from their troubles, by the annual visitation of sickness and its consequences? or will I be credited when I assert that they enjoy as good health as any similar number of persons situated on our most healthy sand hills? however strange it may appear, it is not less true, and to account for it, may puzzle those of more experience than myself. Shall we say that it is the constant exercise which they take, and the simple manner in which they live that defends them from the exciting causes of diseases? these circumstances may have no little influence in contributing to their health but taken alone, they will not solve the problem; for occasionally some poor white man engages in the same business and lives with and like them, but no such person is ever known to escape an attack of fever. May we not then say that there is something peculiar in the

constitution of the blackman, which enables him to enjoy health in an atmosphere, where his master dare not venture, and urge this as a reason or submit it as an argument to prove they should be slaves; such an opinion it is true I have heard advanced, to prove the fallacy of which however I shall not recur to any reasoning on the subject, but merely state one single fact. Three gentlemen of my acquaintance made purchase of slaves brought from Virginia, amounting in number to about forty five; these were placed on three different plantations, with numbers of the former residents of those places, of this number scarce one single individual of the whole escaped sickness, and one third of them died during the first summer, and yet the older inhabitants were healthy.

As it is not my design to engage in speculation, I shall for the present attribute the fact to the benevolence of creative wisdom who, having given to man the privilege of living under almost any temperature, may aut

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

=der region. What I have to say on this subject perfectly coincides with the above statement; for even the wealthy and dissipated portion of society, who enjoy the genial sun of South Carolina, perform this operation with but little difficulty, and the slaves who unites with the advantages of climate extreme simplicity of life, and who are strangers to deformity, a difficult labour is truly of rare occurrence; and the following facts may shew how easy is the operation with them generally for I mention these not as astonishing cases, but, rather to prove the facility with which they bring forth their young.

A gentleman on whom I could rely informed me that one of his slaves, a girl about eighteen years of age, pregnant with her first child was "surprized by nature" when at work in a field a mile or two from the settlement, she made an attempt to reach her hut, but fatigue occasioned her to seek rest under a neighbouring tree, and whilst there, without any human assistance was relieved of her burden; the child she took to her house which

lived and was hearty, the girl went to her work in a few days. A practitioner of respectability related to me a similar case; he was called to visit a woman in labour four or five miles from town, when he saw her there was no symptoms of approaching labour, and after several hours delay he was induced to make examinations, when to his astonishment there was no child to be distinguished, the fact was, that the woman had delivered herself in the field and concealed her offspring which was dead, and had probably gone to bed to avoid work.

As might be expected the children are particularly liable to, and troubled with worms: and here I would say, that in the practice of of medicine the Melia Azedarach is not duly appreciated, for it is extensively used in vulgar practice with never failing success, in cases of the round worm; I believe its narcotic or noxious properties depend on or exist in the outer bark which should always be removed.

W. L. M.c